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ABSTRACT

The single most important thing that a teacher can do for a student is to identify and label specifically what the child does right rather than what he or she does wrong. In an elementary school where students wrote every day and teachers marked every error, students began to write less, using simpler words and eliminating all meaningful writing. A new approach was tried in which the teachers remarked on at least one good aspect of every paper. Gradually, those qualities regarded as desirable appeared more frequently. When the teachers came across something they did not understand, they talked it over with the student. From this positive approach three rules for teacher response were devised: (1) respond to what is right or correct; (2) identify and label specific, desirable qualities; and (3) when helping a student, use specific and positive phrasing that focuses the writer on a problem he or she can solve. These three rules also proved effective in reading instruction. When a teacher began using positive specific responses to first and second grade students' oral reading, student performance improved rapidly. When children completed workbook drills, it appeared more effective to repeat the directions by spotting children who were following the directions and describing what they were doing correctly, than to repeat the directions in disgust to a child who did not listen or who forgot. (HTH)

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TEACHER RESPONSE TO STUDENT EFFORT

The Frequently-Overlooked Key to Success in Teaching

Carolyn Lyles

A person who believes that s/he cannot learn, in fact, cannot learn. Thus, the concept of oneself as a learner is a prerequisite to the acquisition of all learning, including the basic skills. Many environmental factors shape this self-concept. It is the purpose of this article to focus on only one of these--the teacher's response to the student's effort.

Some well-intended teachers are systematically teaching many children that they cannot read, that they cannot learn, and that in our society they are losers. Believing their job to be that of identifying student errors so that the learner can correct them and improve, teachers unintentionally cultivate the child's belief that s/he cannot do anything right, certainly not school work.

How does the dedicated teacher contribute to such a destructive attitude:

--by focusing on what is wrong rather than what is right.

--by neglecting to sharply define expectations.

--by giving responses which focus on the student rather than on the task.

As I work with students and observe the interactions between students and teachers in elementary school classrooms, I am convinced that the single most important thing that a teacher can do for a learner is to identify and label specifically what the child does right.

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How Three Rules of Teacher Responding Were Discovered

My coworkers and I discovered the tremendous impact of this simple strategy quite by accident. A few years ago, when the media proclaimed that "students can't write," our school embarked on a "Students Write Every Day--Teachers Mark Papers Every Night" program. Diligently we marked every misspelled word, every misplaced comma, every missing capital, every incorrect verb form, with the noble intent of eliminating errors. As the weeks passed, students wrote less and used simpler words. In effect, by attempting to eliminate mistakes, we eliminated all meaningful writing.

In desperation we declared a moratorium on marking errors. The alternative of writing "good" on a paper with three misspelled words and an incomplete sentence was illogical. Suddenly we were confronted with the task of defining "good." We wrote:

"I found this paper easy to understand because the events were written in the order that they occurred."

"You used three new science words correctly."

"Wow! What interesting and varied descriptive words!"

"Your use of clauses starting with 'because' and 'therefore' made the cause-effect relationships clear to the reader."

We continued having students write every day, but the teacher collected papers from only one-fifth of her students each day. On the day a student was to hand in an original paper, s/he selected the best from his/her week's writing and proofread and polished that selection before handing it in. The teacher now read about six papers per day and indicated specifically at least one good thing about <u>every</u> paper.

As the teacher labeled specifically that which s/he regarded as desirable, those qualities appeared more frequently. Students started thinking in

terms of "what I did right" rather than "what I did wrong." Both teacher and student energies became focused on models of excellence rather than "what should not be done." Teachers discovered that when they labeled their students' successes, they began to regard their students as successful; as teachers regarded their students as successful, children rapidly grew to fit that image. Thus, our first two rules of teacher response to student effort were defined: first, look for things the student has done that should be continued and emulated by others; second, describe that quality as precisely as possible for the student.

The third rule grew out of interactions which occurred spontaneously in the classrooms of those teachers who steadfastly adhered to the practice of responding positively and specifically to all original student writing. Sooner or later the teacher received a paper that s/he could not understand or which contained a word so uniquely spelled that s/he could not decipher it. Since understanding had to precede a positive and specific response, the teacher took his/her need to the author of the paper. A sincere help-me-to-understand request produced a sincere effort on the part of the student to communicate more accurately or more completely. When the paper was altered to communicate more clearly, the student had grown a bit in self-expression and felt more understood. Now the teacher could identify and label something positive about this work.

Soon we learned that, when communication is difficult, the last thing the learner needs is to have his/her shortcomings enumerated or the mistakes marked with red ink. What is needed is for someone to try to understand the message and to help adjust it until it conveys what the writer intended. So we arrived at the third rule of teacher response to student effort: when the product needs correction or improvement, focus on the task and what can be done to achieve success rather than on the learner.

"This word needs to be spelled correctly."

"This paragraph needs more specific data about your experiment if the

reader is to understand your conclusion."

"I could understand this story better if I knew who 'she' is in this sentence."

Concentrating his/her effort on communicating or on completing the task, the learner is not blocked by negative thoughts about him/herself.

Contrast the focus of the above statements with the following traditional "teaching" statements:

"You spelled this word wrong."

"You failed to support your conclusion."

"You didn't tell whom you meant by 'she'."

Both sets of statements indicate the problem. However, those starting with the word *you* focus the writer's attention on his/her failure rather than on solving the problem. The opening words of the teacher's response statement determine whether the teacher directs the student's attention to him/herself, or to a problem to be solved, or to a possible solution. To start with "I need..." or "The reader needs..." focuses on a problem. To start with "The third sentence needs..." or "This word needs..." focuses on a solution.

Thus, we defined three rules for responding to our students' original writing:

1. Respond to what is right or correct.*
2. Identify and label specific desirable qualities.*
3. While helping a student, use specific and positive phrasing which focuses the writer on a problem that s/he can solve or on possible solutions.*

We never went back to marking errors. Even weaker students started writing articles that were interesting, informative, and clear enough to be shared. Room pride generated group effort in accurate spelling and proofreading when written work was to be displayed in the halls or printed to go home.

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* It is unlikely that we would have arrived at these successful strategies had it not been for previous exposure to the work of Haim Ginott and Thomas Gordon. (See Bibliography.)

As I continue to work with many of these same students as they move through the grades and talk with them about their written work and their feelings about writing, I am gaining some understanding of why describing responses prove so effective. Besides clarifying expectations, the describing response is much less threatening. Even more important, I believe, is that the describing response is non-judgmental, allowing the receiver to make the judgment. Consider the probable student reactions to the following two kinds of teacher feedback statements:

Teacher: "You're such a good writer!" (a judgmental statement)

Students' unspoken reactions:

"Of course I'm good. I'm the best student in this class."

"Who's she trying to kid!"

"She likes it because I copied it over in ink." (This may or may not be the reason for the teacher's comment.)

"I'm not as good as Barbara."

"She's just trying to make me feel better. She knows I'll never be any good."

Teacher: "This essay has a lot of impact because in these three places you supported your position with important facts." (a describing statement)

Students' unspoken reactions:

"I'm glad I went back and looked up my social studies notes."

"Good writing has important facts."

"I did it right this time."

"I'm a good writer." (The teacher's descriptive statement gave the student grounds for a positive evaluation of him/herself.)

"I may not be a fantastic writer, but I told enough to get my point across this time."

Individuals perceive the same message differently regardless of the intent of the sender. A teacher-given judgment which conflicts with the student's self-

evaluation is usually discounted by the receiver. The descriptive response provides evidence supporting a positive self-evaluation, allowing the receiver to arrive at his/her own conclusion.

Application of Descriptive Responding in Reading Classes

The three responding rules, which worked so well nurturing original writing, proved particularly effective in reading instruction. The teaching of comprehension skills and the improvement of oral reading provide two excellent examples.

Comprehension skills, such as stating the main idea, drawing logical conclusions, and making inferences, require direct instruction and guided practice. After explaining, demonstrating, and discussing one of these skills, I have students read an appropriate passage and write their best expression of the skill being taught as a phrase on a scrap of paper. As they are writing, I walk around the room and ask children with quality responses to write theirs on the chalkboard. Then we read them one by one and identify why they are good.

When I started using positive, specific responding to first and second graders' oral reading, student production improved from the very first day.

Teacher: "Jess, you stopped at periods and your questions sounded like questions. You know what to do when you see these punctuation marks."

Jess: I missed a lot of words and I don't read fast like Amanda."

Teacher: "When you do get the words, your reading sounds natural, like talking. I like that."

Jess: (surprised expression) "I guess that is good."

Jess's facial expression made me feel that he now had a new and better concept of himself as a reader. If I had made no response to his oral reading, I believe he would labeled himself a bad reader because he had struggled with several

words. If I had said, "You need to practice reading more at home" or "Work harder on your word cards," he probably would have burst into tears, feeling angry with himself and abused by me. If I had said, "That was good,"* he very likely would have translated my comment as a message that I thought it was as good as he could do because he was hopeless.

Responding to Workbook Pages, Dittoes, and Skillbooks

Reading workbooks, dittoes, and skillbooks are very much a part of some reading programs. My bias is that they are appropriate when the skill has been thoroughly taught and practice is needed to internalize it. It is not practical to write, "You have demonstrated the ability to match words of opposite meaning," on ten or twenty papers. It is practical and, in my opinion, essential to have students verbalize what skill they are practicing before starting the work: "I am practicing matching words of opposite meanings." Further, a quick trip around the room as soon as work starts provides an opportunity for the teacher to be sure all students are practicing correctly. Then s/he can give descriptive oral responses:

"These are all correct."

"You are matching the opposite words."

"You listened to the directions and checked the first three boxes with the answers in the back of the book before going on to the remainder of the page."

"Read these to me aloud....Which two are you going to change?"

"Neat work."

"You are working fast and accurately."

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* Incredible as it may seem, Mary Budd Rowe's classroom tape recordings prove that in most classrooms "The bottom five [students in the class] receive more praise but the pertinence of the praise is difficult to determine. As much as 50% of the praise did not seem to be attached to correct responding." Mary Budd Rowe, (1974), page 298.

In my experience it is more effective to repeat the directions by spotting children who are following the directions and then to describe what they are doing rather than by repeating the directions in disgust to a child who didn't listen or who has forgotten.

After the drill work has been completed, I respond in one of three ways depending on the accuracy of the work:

1. 100% accurate: a special mark or sticker
2. 80%-99% accurate: mark the specific error or errors; student corrects; student reads the corrected item(s) to me; I write "Good" or "You did it!" or "All right" on the corrected paper.
3. Below 80% accuracy: Erase all responses, both correct and incorrect, while conveying the message that "this is another chance." Under no circumstances is this a punitive action. It must be perceived by both student and teacher as a renewed opportunity to succeed. The redone work is then treated exactly as first-try work.

This strategy allows the teacher to spend whatever time s/he has working with those students who have put out sufficient effort to get most of the work right and who need clarification of a word, expression, or complex sentence or paragraph structure. If the child applies him/herself to the task and still cannot get 80% correct, then the assignment is not appropriate and diagnosis and in-depth teaching are needed. Conversely, students who consistantly get 100% correct need close observation to see if they should be placed in more challenging materials.

It Isn't Easy

Simple as they seem, these teaching behaviors prove difficult to implement for three reasons. First, for many teachers, it means changing the habits of a lifetime. As they were corrected as children, they feel morally obligated to correct others. Second, without realizing it, teachers often do not have sharp, well-defined goals which they can verbalize and communicate precisely to their students. Descriptive responding requires a deeper understanding and verbalization of the qualities which make the child's product "good." Lastly, the teacher using descriptive responding can never respond automatically. Every response must be based on an analysis of the child's effort.

The Rewards Are Worth the Effort

Personalities of students and teachers show positive changes as awareness of expectations grows, success generates further success, and mutual respect replaces mutual faultfinding. No child goes home feeling "just plain dumb" when he has "written a story with a surprise ending--the O. Henry technique," and "made Martin sound tough in one place and scared in another" as he read his favorite part of *The Bully of Barkham Street* aloud to his reading group, and "figured out that 'seldom' meant 'almost never'" all by himself. No teacher can feel that s/he is "getting nowhere with that room full of congenital idiots" if s/he has labeled at least two things every child did right just that very day--even if s/he did have to maneuver a couple of children into doing it. Thus, I believe that the single most important thing that a teacher can do for a learner is to identify and label specifically what the child has done that is right.

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